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ABSTRACT

This issue of "Media & Values" explores the influence of mass media on the perceptions about aging in our society. The essays present various interpretations of that influence and the implications for the society. Articles in the "Awareness/Analysis" section include: (1) "Granny Bashing: New Myth Recasts Elders as Villains" (Ronald F. Pollack); (2) "Lifeline or Leisure: TV's Varied Role" (Kathaleen Reid); (3) "Attacking Ageism: Stereotypes Give Way to Active Advertising" (Robert Wood); (4) "On-Line Connection Makes Friends for Seniors" (Mary Furlong); (5) "Going for the Gold: Prime Time's Sexy Seniors" (Mary Cassata; Barbara Irwin); and (6) "How Does Hollywood Handle Ageism?" (Dorothea Petrie; Daniel Petrie). Articles in the "Reflection? Action" section are (1) "Social Justice: TV Sidesteps Real Life Struggles" (Donna Demac); (2) "Children: Media Help Fill Grandparent Gap" (Judith Myers-Walls); (3) "Pastoring: Senior Productions Raise Self-Esteem" (Peter Paulsen); (4) "Women: Stereotype Shifts to Sexy Schemers" (Sally Steenland); (5) "Youth: Big Chill Cools Lost Generation" (Bill Wolfe); (6) "Family Life: Media Helps Harvest History and Heritage" (Helen H. Graham); (7) "Video Visits Help Families Say 'I Love You'" (Barbie White); (8) "How to Watch Television with Your Grandchildren" (Ellen DeFranco); (9) "Who's in Charge? A Media Questionnaire for Grandparents"; (10) "Watch/Read/Listen: Resources for Follow-up"; and (11) "Springboard to Action: Putting This Issue to Work" (Elizabeth Thoman). (EH)

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Media&Values

A Quarterly Resource for Media Awareness

Winter 1989

Number 45

ED 407 358

COMING OF AGE:

Media and the Mature Audience

SO 028 070

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Ageism in Ads p. 12

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Media&Values

is a unique resource to stimulate awareness, creative thinking and reflective action on the media issues of our time. As a magazine, *Media&Values* came early to the recognition that emerging media and new technology — from computers to video to satellites — could bind or separate human beings, but would leave no one unchanged.

"Recognizing that the media environment in which we live is a major agent of socialization and directly affects the quality of life for individuals and the society at large, our purpose is to challenge and enable both media consumers and media industries to raise questions about and to claim greater responsibility for that media environment."

— Statement of Purpose

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Media&Values

Winter 1989 Number 45

STARTING POINT

It's not the same old story.

When we first discussed an issue on media and aging, *Cocoon* was delighting audiences of all ages in movie theatres and *The Golden Girls* had become the hit of Saturday night television.

All of a sudden it was OK to be gray. We wondered how much mass media was intertwined with this trend? And what future impact media would have as contemporary society continued to age?

As often happens, the search for answers uncovered more topics than we could possibly explore in our few pages. Portrayal and stereotyping were only the beginning. Digging deeper, we found "gerontophobia" perpetuated by anti-aging marketing campaigns and the mixed blessing of business and industry "targeting" our elders as lucrative consumers.

If you check your library, you'll find that there are few references to these issues outside of academic journals in gerontology. We are pleased, therefore, to contribute this landmark collection of articles and reflections, questions and concerns for public debate. I hope you'll find, as we did, that an issue on media and aging is *not* the same old story.

•

Media&Values continues to evolve as a publication designed to promote and provoke discussion about the role of media in our lives.

To do that better, we've redesigned our "Reflection/Action" section (pp. 16-24) and in response to many requests, created a "tear-out" page to use as a discussion-starter for groups and classes. Please note that you may photocopy pp. 21-22 in any quantity for non-commercial use.

And because we want to *start* discussion, not end it, we've changed the last page to provide you with practical take-off points on issues raised by the issue. Let us know where your search leads you.

Elizabeth Thoman

Executive Editor

COMING OF AGE:
Media and the Mature Audience

Once almost invisible, older characters are now prominent in many movies, TV shows and commercials. But as entertainment, marketing and communications experts reveal, the "graying of the media" often hides new, more subtle stereotypes and ambivalence about aging.

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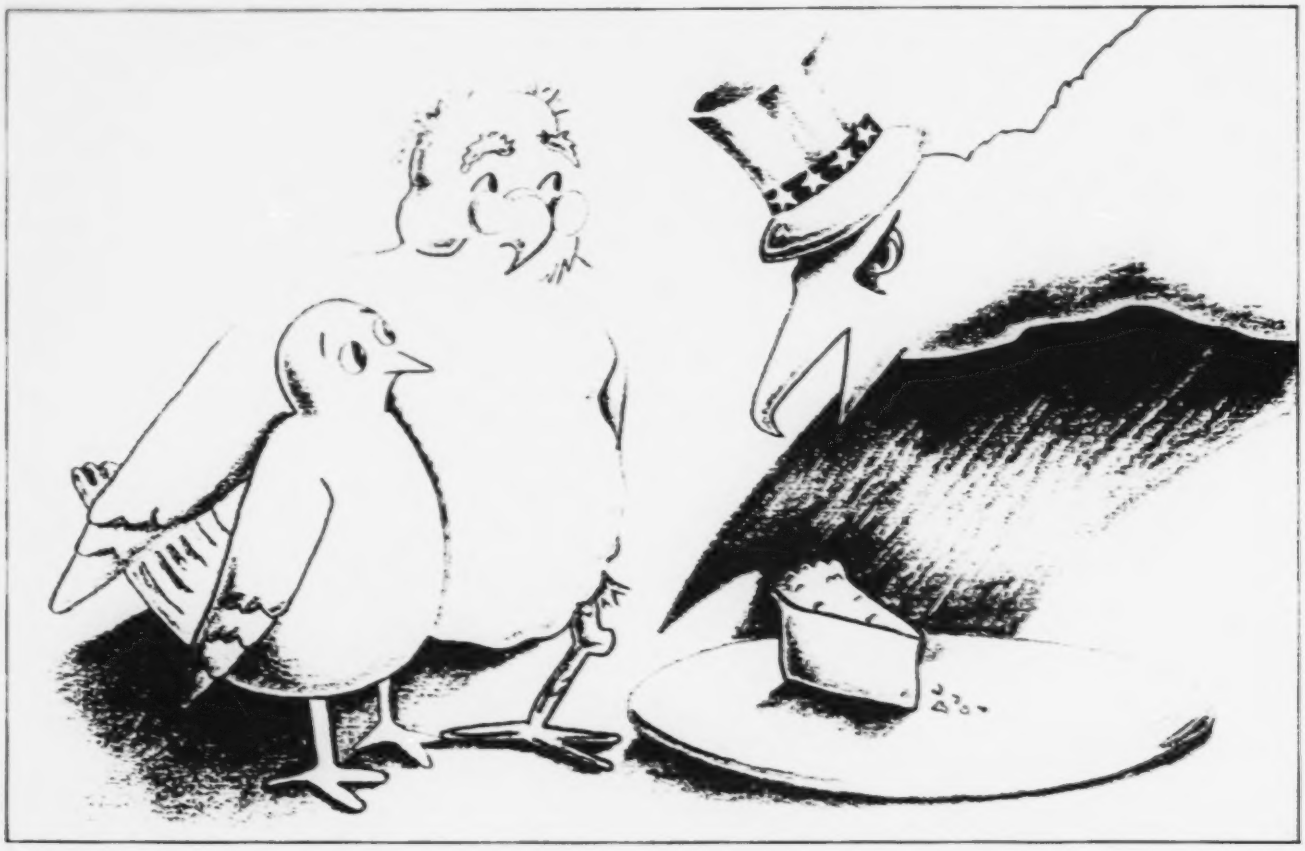
GRANNY BASHING:

Media's New Myth Recasts Elders as Villains

By Ronald F. Pollack



The handsome young NBC reporter looks intently at the politician he's interviewing and asks: "How difficult is it for someone running for office to speak the truth on issues affecting the elderly?"

Later in the broadcast, the reporter's view of "the truth" becomes clear. He characterizes two presidential aspirants who favor cuts in Social Security as "the only candidates talking frankly about Social Security." Presumably, to NBC reporter Steve Kroft at least, candidates who want to *strengthen* Social Security are being something other than frank and truthful.

During his commentary, Kroft describes the elderly as a powerful "special interest" that "over the years built its power base with a carefully cultivated image of frailty and vulnerability while quietly wielding enough power to shape our weekly paychecks." Meetings of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) are "indoctrination" sessions of "the most powerful special interest group in the country."

Just as it once was fashionable to depict older Americans as universally poor and powerless, it has now become fashionable to depict them as universally affluent and politically unstoppable. To my mind, the new stereotype is as distorted as the old one, and it is more dangerous.

NBC isn't the only network, and television isn't the only medium, to portray the elderly in these terms. *The New Republic*

ran a front-cover cartoon of a phalanx of bug-eyed old folks labelled in bold, 60-point headline type: "GREEDY GEEZERS." The issue featured an article by Henry Fairlie, who wrote of sympathy for the elderly as "misdirected."

And the media are increasingly receptive to the strange notion that there is a generational war going on: "Today's Elderly Vs. Tomorrow's" according to the *San Francisco Chronicle;* "The Coming Conflict As We Soak the Young to Enrich the Old," according to *The Washington Post;* "Age Wars: The Coming Battle Between Young and Old," in the words of *Futurist* magazine.

The New York Times describes Social Security recipients as "the monied classes." And *Forbes* magazine sums it all up in an article on "The Old Folks": "The reality is that they're living well. The trouble is, there are too many of them."

Media Myths

Although several myths about the economic status of our grandparents' age group have recently gained currency, the facts are otherwise. They are worth examining one by one.

No. 1: No More Poverty

According to the most pernicious of these false assumptions, elderly poverty has been wiped out. America's elders are living on Easy Street.

In actuality, poverty remains a painful fact of life for millions of older Americans, especially older women. With one out of eight older Americans surviving below the official poverty line, more than two out of five of our grandparents are living lives of precarious economic vulnerability. Many of our vulnerable elders scrape by on total incomes under $210 a week. All told, the elderly's reward after decades of hard work is the highest poverty rate of all adult Americans. And despite the picture of Greedy Geezers, only about a quarter of the elderly enjoy even the modest comforts that go with annual incomes over $16,000.

No. 2: War Between the Generations

The media have focused on the drama of a war of "intergenerational equity" between young and old, who are forced to compete for scarce resources. The fact, fortunately, is that the generations are not at each other's throats. In American families, grandchildren and grandparents still care about each other, still feel each others' pain.

A national opinion survey conducted by Daniel Yankelovich for the AARP in 1987 drew a portrait of American families bound closely across generational lines. Young and old agreed that family responsibilities were lifelong—specifically that the parents' responsibility to their children doesn't end when children grow up and move out, and also that grown children have a responsibility for helping to support elderly parents.

In fact, the older respondents were most insistent on the parents' continuing obligation toward their children. Younger participants believed most strongly in the responsibility of children to help their parents.

To believe a picture of generations at loggerheads, the observer must ignore the centrality of the family in American lives. Only in the abstract can the elderly be anything but Grandma or Grandpa to the young. On this point, network news can learn something about reality from the situation comedies.

"The classic political trade-off has been reframed from guns vs. butter to guns vs. senior citizens. All of a sudden it's canes vs. kids."

Robert Binstock, professor of aging health and society, Case Western Reserve University

The notion that old and young are competing for scarce resources is a canard often perpetrated by lobbyists opposed to government spending for the young as well as the old. The real competition for resources in the 1980s has been between the very rich and the rest of us, regardless of age.

No. 3: The Support Pyramid

According to the new litany, the aging of America and a growing pool of retirees have created a disproportionate burden for a shrinking work force struggling to support more and more dependents.

It's just not true that there are fewer workers or more dependents. What has

changed is the age of the dependents: fewer children and more grandparents. In fact, there are more workers to support the community and far fewer children to be educated, fed, clothed and nurtured.

Yes, there are more retirees to draw pensions and Social Security, but that change is less dramatic than the decrease in the number of children to be supported.

No. 4: Not Doing Their Share

Subscribers to the greedy geezers myth like to tell us that the elderly haven't been paying enough in these times of federal budget deficits. You hear this often when television news analysts talk about how to reduce the deficit. But the reality is different. Changes in the Social Security structure beginning in the early '80s, massive increases in Medicare premiums and the cost of uncovered hospital charges have all made deep inroads into older persons' pockets.

In the last eight years, Medicare premiums have nearly tripled, and so has the cost of hospital charges that Medicare won't pay. Sacrifices? Belt tightening? Our elders have been paying their share and more.

Creating Media Myths

With senior poverty still more prevalent than poverty among other adults, how did the notion of the wealthy old folks spread so rapidly?

In part, it was a result of an attempt by the media (and some senior groups) to brighten up the image of the elderly by focusing on the healthy and the affluent among them. This was encouraged by advertisers who were marketing to affluent seniors.

But it is clear that this agenda also suits the political purposes of those who, in general, oppose *all* social spending.

Take, for instance, the contributions from major defense contractors such as General Dynamics, TRW, Rockwell and conglomerates such as ITT and US Steel to an organization called Americans for Generational Equity (AGE). These corporations have a lot to gain from shifting the heated national debate over deficit reduction away from two major spending areas, defense contracts and expanded tax giveaways. AGE has been running an "educational campaign" on why Social Security (the program you need to cut if you don't want to lose Pentagon spending or tax giveaways) should be lower. Their arguments are shaped to appeal to generations not yet eligible for Social Security benefits.

Only in the abstract can the elderly be anything but Grandma or Grandpa to the young. On this point, network news can learn something about reality from the situation comedies.

As noted by Common Cause, the insurance industry, another AGE supporter, is attracted by the probable boost Social Security reductions would bring..

While groups like AGE suggest that the interests of the undeserving elderly conflict with the interests of the deserving young, their energies seem directed more to cutting social spending for grandma than promoting social spending for her grandchildren.

Yet groups like AGE have been successful in getting media attention for their sophisticated granny-bashing.

Why? Let me suggest three key reasons:

1. The media have done an incomplete job of educating themselves about social policy questions that affect the elderly. Although there are some first-rate journalists covering these issues — Susan Spencer of CBS, Bob Rosenblatt of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Jerry Estill of the Associated Press come to mind — it's still possible to get assigned to social policy beats with far less expertise than it takes to get assigned to cover high school football. And far too many editors see the problems of the elderly as too boring or depressing for regular coverage.

2. Once again, the elderly are a victim of the media's constant search for the new, the chic, the trendy. Elderly poverty is old hat. The greedy geezers are new, colorful, and, best of all, visually interesting.

3. Third, there's pack journalism. Once the opponents of social spending have placed one story on how granny is robbing junior's piggy bank, every other assignment editor in town wants the story. Truth and enterprise too often fall behind in the rush to keep up with the pack.

Ultimately, the American media does neither a perfect, nor a perfectly miserable, job of reporting on older Americans. Coverage of the funding needed for long-term care, for example, has been quite good. Coverage of Social Security has been generally less successful.

We have a right to expect better. After all, the American press is the freest and probably the best in the world. As America ages, making the problems of the elderly increasingly central to American families, we have a right to hope for more serious and less naive press attention focusing on facts, not fantasy, and resisting the temptation to pit one group against another.

Ronald F. Pollack is executive director of the Villers Foundation.

Activist Pioneers Ageism Issue

This issue on media's relationship to aging would hardly be complete without recognizing long-time Gray Panther activist Lydia Bragger.

A pioneer of the anti-ageism movement, Bragger began working against elderly stereotyping in the early '70s. For years she served as chair of the Gray Panther Media Watch Task Force which, in 1981, organized the White House Mini-Media Conference, "Challenging Age Stereotypes in the Media."

As a public relations professional, she understood that media leaders would respond to information about older people's buying power.

"We were working in a lot of areas, including public education," she noted while describing her efforts. "But when (advertising agency) Ogilvie and Mather did a study that showed that people over 65 constituted a $60 billion market, it definitely had an impact.

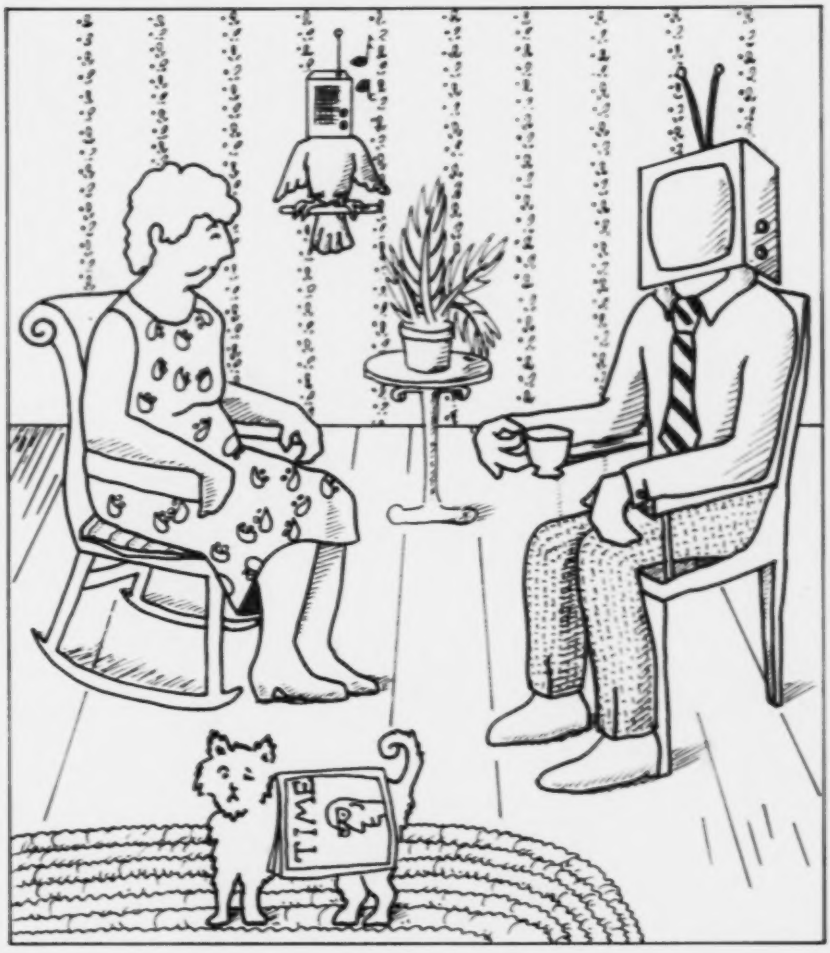
"The new stereotype may make the image too rosy, and a great deal of work still needs to be done. But you have to remember that when we started, older people were experts on denture cream and not much else. If you had showed affection between old people — or, heaven forbid, lovemaking — everyone would have thought you were crazy."

— The Editors

LIFELINE OR LEISURE?

Research Shows TV Plays Varied Role

By Kathaleen Reid



In living rooms across the nation, we are told, listless seniors sit staring at TVs, trapped by loneliness and the fear that the world outside is mean and devoid of compassion. The stereotype is sad, but it is also one that is widely accepted as another sign of society's disintegration.

A decade ago, cartoonist Jules Feiffer drew a bead on the problem, penning a strip in which an older man sits talking to his TV.

"No one loves me," he says, and the TV responds, "I love you."

Each time the man complains that he has no one to take care of him, to give to him or to be his friend, the TV assures him that he is not alone.

Dismayed at his reliance on an electronic gadget, the man says, "I can't go through life entirely dependent on television."

"Could you survive without me?" asks the TV. "But," questions the man, "is that enough?"

"That's show business," the TV glibly concludes.

Feiffer's talent prompts a laugh. But to what degree is this scenario a true reflection of our older population? Are the majority of America's senior citizens really couch potatoes who, having little else to turn to, accept with gratitude whatever TV offers them?

Fortunately, the answer is no. Research I conducted with Garrett J. O'Keefe of the University of Wisconsin/Madison, shows the older generation to be a highly diverse group with eclectic media needs and patterns of usage.

Those that work closely with our older citizens know that often the only thing seniors have in common is their age range, and sometimes even that doesn't count for much.

A single historical event — the Depression, for example — can have a dramatic impact on one's world view, with effects lasting a lifetime. That can mean a vast difference in outlook and lifestyle between someone who embarked on married life in 1929 compared with another of today's seniors who was an infant when the stock market crashed.

Window on the World

Research shows us that TV viewing does increase after age 55 — although all media usage, including television, decreases among the oldest members of society, those over age 84. It seems that for the younger old, at least, TV is an important window to the world and a basis for shared experience for seniors.

While many of today's elderly are housebound by health or limited resources and some certainly fit the unhappy stereotype described above, countless others are as highly mobile and as active as they wish to be.

As the number of seniors has increased, so has their diversity in terms of health, education, income, entertainment and information needs, and lifestyle. The increased diversity means that one cannot generalize about this age group's use of media because its members' choices are predicated on individual abilities and interests.

Implicit in the couch potato stereotype

is the assumption that seniors are passive TV consumers. They are not, and media practitioners who approach this audience with that assumption will find their programming missing the mark.

The successful media programmer — be it for TV or otherwise — must see seniors as "active" participants in the media process, for that is what they are: individuals shaped by divergent social and psychological experiences who act out of who they are, not merely what is available to them.

Divergent Interests

A look at the preferences of older audiences as revealed in a 1984-85 survey I worked on with O'Keefe points out the diversity of media usage among seniors.

The survey was conducted for the National Institute of Justice as part of a program to develop TV public service crime prevention spots aimed at seniors. Field interviews about TV viewing habits were conducted around the nation by the Gallup Organization. More than 1,300 non-institutionalized Americans over age 60 were queried for 45 minutes each, making this one of the most extensive surveys of its kind.

For summation purposes, all TV programming was divided among 10 broad categories: news and information, game and quiz, music and variety, sports, crime, action, soaps, romance, comedies, religious.

Overall, news and information programs emerged as the programs most frequently watched by seniors, a finding paralleled in numerous studies of the general population.

Comedies and music and variety shows both were strong second choices, a finding not matched for audiences of other ages. Then came game and quiz shows, sports and crime programming, followed somewhat distantly in descending order by religious programs, action Westerns, romance dramas and soap operas.

The preference for news and informational programs was shared across the demographic board, the lone exception being lower-income seniors. However, a closer look at the subgroups within the survey reveals a more complex picture.

Meeting Many Needs

Women, for example, tended to watch more game, variety, soap and romance programming, while men preferred action-oriented programs, such as crime dramas and sports (an expected pattern that also holds up for other age groups).

"Television serves an important function and has great social value for older people; it is their connecting link with the affairs of society. For the older viewers, the opportunity to share in common knowledge means that he or she is still a 'member of the club.'"

Richard Davis,
Television and the Aging Audience

The less educated watched more types of programs in general, perhaps because TV has become their main source for entertainment and interacting with the world. In general, this group focused on game shows, crime and action shows, soaps, romance and religious programming. Younger seniors, those 60-70, preferred game shows, sports, crime and action programs and comedies.

Those in the upper-income category (household incomes above $25,000) liked news and sports more, while those seniors at the opposite end of the economic scale preferred religious programs.

Nor did any consistent viewing tastes emerge based on environmental factors (such as whether the person lives alone or with others, in an urban or rural setting, in a home or apartment). For example, we learned that single older people, who tend to be women, watched soaps, romance and religious shows regardless of their living arrangement, perhaps as a way of involving themselves emotionally in something outside themselves.

Those with organizational contacts — members of clubs, churches or other social groupings — watched more news, sports, variety and religious shows and eschewed crime and action dramas and soaps. On the other hand, crime and action shows and soaps were preferred by those seniors who described themselves as having a more fatalistic view and who felt less of a sense of personal control over their lives.

Studies Analyze Viewing Relationships

Research conducted over the last 20 years offers a number of theories about the relationship between older people and TV.

■

Television viewing does go up after age 50. Physical limitations related to advancing age help to explain why, according to several studies. Older people experiencing problems with seeing or hearing (which afflict at least 20 percent of people over 65) find television easier to deal with, since it provides both verbal and visual information together. Thus they may turn to it when sensory loss begins to discourage use of radio and/or print. (S. Chaffee and D. Wilson, 1975)

■

Several researchers have suggested that television replaces lost social contacts for older viewers, helping them maintain an ongoing sense of participation in society and combat feelings of alienation and loneliness. A 1974 study (M. Graney) developed a theory of activity "substitution" or "compensation," which sees heavier media use as a means of compensating for financial, social and physical losses people experience as they age. According to the behavior exchanges they postulate, decreases in the ability to read and lower attendance at religious services and organizations both lead to increased TV viewing.

■

Many researchers suggest increased television viewing by older people as a sign of disengagement from the world; others see it as an attempt to remain in touch. And the process is not a neutral one. The negative stereotypes of aging seen on some television programs may actually hasten withdrawal by promoting lower self-esteem, according to a study by F. Korzenny and K. Neuendorf (1980). Characterizations that depict seniors as "assets" or "hindrances" to society tend to promote self concepts that match the portrayals, research showed.

In addition to content, motivation for TV viewing was also surveyed.

Staying Involved

We found that the primary gratifications the aging audience sought from media, including TV, were a sense of being more involved in the world, entertainment, acquiring information and passing time. Those who spent the most time watching TV — four to six hours daily — were mainly motivated by a desire to be entertained and to pass time.

On the other hand, those who spent fewer hours in front of the tube and more time reading newspapers — the other media of choice for older Americans — appeared motivated in the main by the desire to acquire information. Those who were most apt to use either medium for information-seeking purposes tended to be more active, more involved in their communities and better educated.

An interesting question yet to be fully answered is why those over age 84 show such a strong decline in TV watching and interest in media in general.

Some experts think this decrease is simply part of a "disengagement" process, a withdrawal from society as the end of life grows near, hastened, perhaps, by declining health. A key psychological element of this process may be a turning within to review one's life and internally resolve outstanding personal issues prior to death. Others, however, feel that mainly physical problems with hearing, vision and alertness account for most of the decline.

For the practitioner, these findings underscore the need to speak to seniors as individuals. Reaching seniors means being aware of the full range of media, its content and the choices made by older people.

And remember, the key word here is choice. The majority of seniors actively choose the media they want. It is absolutely vital that seniors be seen in that light if their strength, dignity and responsibility for self are to be respected.

In fact, it's increasingly clear that viewers continue to make clear choices throughout their media-using lives. And through each stage of the life cycle, those choices reflect not only their current needs and tastes but who they are.

Kathaleen Reid is an assistant professor of communication at Lee College, Cleveland, Tennessee. She has made a special study of media use by the elderly.

TV's Dark Vision Can Be Frightening

In the hit 1988 movie *Crossing Delancy*, a key scene shows heroine Izzy visiting her grandmother at a self-defense class for seniors. The fierce concentration of the elderly women students reflects their determination to protect themselves against purse snatchers and muggers.

In this case media reflect life: older people, among others, do take self-defense classes. But the scene also represents another phenomenon — the vulnerability and fears of older people, especially women, living isolated in urban neighborhoods.

In *Crossing Delancy*, the media mirrors those fears. But in other cases, it may play a role in causing them. Recent research confirms earlier studies showing television's role in creating fearful viewers. But

The issue of fear and concern about crime among the elderly is a far more complex one than earlier data suggested.

it also shows the relationship to be a complex one.

According to a long-held "cultivation hypothesis," heavy television viewing leads to a "mean world syndrome" that causes viewers to expect in reality the crime and danger they see on television. Older people were thought to be particularly susceptible for two reasons: 1) they see themselves as particularly vulnerable; 2) TV's world itself depicts older people as being without value and often as victims of crime.

Recent research, however, shows only narrow support for this hypothesis. According to *Crime News and Real-World Blues: A Panel Study of Social Reality*, by researchers Garrett J. O'Keefe and Kathaleen Reid, "There is no indication that overall television viewing or viewership of crime dramas has any impact on people's fear of crime, perceptions of its extent, or attitudes about self-protection."

However, the findings do provide *narrow* support for a more fearful view of the world by those who are heavy viewers of *TV news*.

As researcher Reid describes it, "The telling argument here is that crime fear and concern appear to be shaped by televised crime news exclusively, not by crime news overall — at least not as presented in newspapers."

The primary difference is that when reading the newspaper, one tends to screen stories by scanning the headlines. Thus a person may selectively choose to read or not to read about a crime.

But when watching TV news, the viewer cannot select whether to watch or not watch a specific story. In addition, "live" reports from the scene of a crime and/or "blood and guts" reporting add to the emotional impact. Especially if a crime is particularly gruesome, the televised coverage may have a strong impact on viewers, young or old.

"The *way* crime news is presented on TV, not the amount of crime per se, appears to be the culprit," she adds.

Although many older people fear crime, their view of themselves as potential victims varies, Reid notes. For example, most older people are aware that their danger of being burglarized is low. But their feelings of physical vulnerability often make them feel less safe than other citizens when out alone after dark. Evidently they believe, regardless of statistics, that people their age are more likely to be victimized; in fact, studies show that up to 25 percent of elderly women fear going out at night.

Media itself can be used to counteract its own negative effects, according to Reid. Public service spots, radio broadcasts and informational programs all have high potential for providing crime prevention information and training to vulnerable members of the audience, thus increasing mobility and reducing fear.

ATTACKING AGEISM:

Senior Stereotypes Give Way to Active Advertising

By Robert Wood

An advertisement for a calcium dietary supplement, recently seen in numerous national magazines, depicts a woman's silhouette frame by frame as she moves rightward across a page. She is apparently aging before our eyes, growing progressively older and more stooped as she succumbs to osteoporosis. By the last frame she needs the support of a cane.

Another ad, obviously directed to the over-50 age group, pictures a stereotypical white-haired old lady leaning out of a car window and holding a glass of dark liquid. The headline reads: "Prune Power To Go." Accompanying copy describes the virtues of a prune product in dealing with a failing digestive system.

Both ads reflect the lack of respect and fear of aging — in short, the *ageism* — typical of the media's treatment of older people. For years, until *The Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote* began to buck the trend, advertising and entertainment media alike reflected the prevailing stereotype of seniors as bumbling, crotchety or senile. With perpetual frowns on their faces, the older people in shows and commercials lived only to criticize younger people and nurse their aches and pains.

These advertisements have something else in common. Neither would be accepted for the advertising schedule of *Modern Maturity*. Although only formulated in 1982, our extremely strict advertising policy is rooted in *Modern Maturity*'s history as a major communication arm of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

Staying Active

Founded in 1958 by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a retired teacher and high school principal who also formed the National Retired Teachers Association and AARP, the magazine's positive, enlightened tone toward aging reflects her emphasis on urging older Americans to be active in society, to be committed to the future and to lead lives of independence, dignity and purpose.

As the most prominent magazine for seniors, and now the largest circulation magazine in the United States, *Modern Maturity* has long recognized that its readers, all 19.4 million of them, comprise a vital and productive segment of our population. Older people are not a homogeneous group. They are as economically, socially and politically diverse as any other segment of our population, comprising sick and well, rich and poor dynamic and depressed, all stripes of society, and they deserve to be portrayed that way, not shown as stuck in the mud, or in a wheelchair, or rocking and whittling, when in fact some may be rocking and rolling.

> ***"Instead of a message that says, 'I feel terrible, give me product X,' we welcome ads that say, 'I feel great with product X.'"***
>
> **Modern Maturity**
> ***advertising standards***

Today, when we go over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house, Grandma may not be awaiting us sweetly with a big plate of cookies fresh from the oven. She may be working on the computer, or taking a psychology class, or holding down the late shift at the cannery.

As a general interest publication, *Modern Maturity* is written for, not about, this diverse and energetic elderly population. Issues crammed full of lavishly illustrated articles on current affairs, travel, art, health, fitness, literature and personal finance reflect the variety and breadth of this age group's interests. This positive outlook is mirrored in our

Ad Guidelines Accentuate The Positive

Six suggestions from *Modern Maturity* could make any publication's advertising more reflective of senior diversity.

- *Don't make a long story short:* older people like to have plenty of product information on which to make a decision.
- *Take 15 years, at least, off your target age group:* people tend to report that they feel younger than their chronological age.
- *Don't put them all on a diet:* most older people eat the same foods as anyone else, and many have cooked nutritious food, for years.
- *Keep a sense of humor:* more time to relax means more time to smile.
- *Don't take the romance out of life:* there may be more time for it.
- *Plan for their future:* life is continuing, not rushing toward its close.

advertising. Its success is demonstrated by our status as the United States' largest circulation magazine.

A New Standard

In keeping with our long-term editorial philosophy are the strictest advertising guidelines of any publication we've heard of. In fact, the magazine's advertising department turns down 35 to 40 percent of the ads submitted for publication, mostly because we consider them downers, or ageist, or because the ad message tends to pigeonhole older people in some way.

As demonstrated by the summary accompanying this article, the advertising guidelines are detailed and comprehensive. For example, ads for wheelchairs, back braces, tub lifts, page magnifiers and many other products whose makers aim "to remedy the aches and pains of aging" are forbidden. The reasoning? Aging is not necessarily about aches and pains. Aging is about living.

The guidelines also focus on ad layouts and art; we try to persuade advertisers to make ads aimed at the older population as attractive and appealing as those directed at any other age group. Luckily for us, many advertisers are seeing the point and working with us.

Unfortunately, many of the image creators in the media and at the ad agencies haven't caught on yet. They still imagine older people as old coots and crones, deaf to today's reality and lost in mumblings of the good old days of Calvin Coolidge — or immersed in their physical complaints. Most ad people haven't picked up on the dramatic demographic revolution that's taking place in our country. Truly, we are witnessing a change as profound as the

one that shook America 25 years ago, when baby boomers started flexing their economic muscle.

At the last turn of the century, people over 65 made up about four percent of the population — around 3.1 million out of 75 million. The median age of the population then was just under 23 years.

Today there are more than 30 million Americans over the age of 65, representing 12.1 percent of the population. The median age in America today is about 32 years. Thus, while the general population has about tripled in size, the group over 65 has increased nearly tenfold. It is the fastest-growing segment of the American population.

Spreading the Word

Modern Maturity is upbeat about older people, and as part of AARP is trying hard to educate everyone about the realities and opportunities of aging. In addition to publishing *Modern Maturity*, AARP and its publications division seek to thwart ageism on other fronts, too.

Several key executives travel the country frequently, speaking to community and business organizations about the older population. Major corporations, service clubs, teachers' organizations, community and business associations are among the groups hosting these sessions.

Similarly, *Modern Maturity* recently presented highlights of a most instructive study it commissioned, *The Mature Americans*. The study, conducted by The Daniel Yankelovich Group, Inc., compared the attitudes and lifestyle of America's 50-and-over population with those of the generation immediately following, demonstrating that the values and attitudes of older Americans are very similar to those of the rest of the population.

Modern Maturity also distributes videos and many other materials directed at current and potential advertisers to illustrate the vitality of the older audience.

After years spent jawboning our friends in the advertising business about older people, the magazine's attempts to change marketers' attitudes have created a body of information that can be helpful to anyone who wants to improve communications with the older population.

On a daily basis, *Modern Maturity* encourages advertising that stresses positive messages. For example, instead of a message that says, "I feel terrible, give me product X," we welcome ads which say, "I feel great with product X."

To help educate advertisers, *Modern Maturity* recently created and distributed guidelines for *How To Advertise to Maturity*. As the selection in this article shows, its goal is to help develop positive advertising communications to people age 50 and over. We dedicated it to "understanding the millions of mature Americans who are active, involved and eager for new experiences."

"People age 50 and over represent a huge, many-faceted public, which to many advertisers represents a new target market spanning (depending on how you view it) three or four generations of men and women, every ethnic group and income level and all walks of life."

Modern Maturity
advertising standards

In contrast to the advertisements described at the beginning of this article, one ad that we recently accepted with great delight pictured a sleek white convertible Mustang. It looks like almost any other automobile advertisement until the reader hits the tag line: "Just when the kids had you all figured out." Now that's a refreshing line.

Another ad that could have been mundane, but wasn't, sports the headline "Cure baldness." The visual pictures two vanilla ice cream cones — one naked, the other with a sprinkling of wheat germ. It's a funny and inspiring way to suggest that readers eat more wheat germ to promote good health.

As the population ages, many members of the media may find, as we have, that respect for the humanity of the aging makes good business sense. But much more importantly, they will also find that they can enrich the stories their commercials and programs tell by recognizing the humanity and diversity of older characters. For whether or not it is true that "growing older is growing better," it is clear that people don't lose individuality as they grow older. Instead, they become evermore themselves, and that is one of the beauties of age.

Robert E. Wood is director of the publications division of the American Association of Retired Persons and publishing director of Modern Maturity *magazine.*

Is There Gold in Gray?

"The private sector's discovery of the gray market is a very mixed blessing.

On the one hand, business and industry's sudden attention to the elderly provides an important contrast to an earlier day, when we simply omitted the older people from advertising, and that, in turn, reflected their exclusion from active particpation in the mainstream.

At the same time, the current efforts to develop and capture the aging market may have the effect of creating needs where none exist, reinforcing separatist policies and approaches, and in particular, I think, it may divert attention from the needs of low-income elderly people.

We're creating a new image of older Americans as a largely affluent consumer group, and that, in turn, may support public policies that de-emphasize providing very necessary government programs and services to the many older people who are not that well off."

Dr. Meredith Minkler, School of Public Health, University of California/Berkeley in The Gerontologist *(February, 1989)*

ON-LINE CONNECTION
Makes Friends for Seniors

By Mary Furlong

As a computer education specialist in the early '80s, I was excited about the prospects for introducing computers to new users. But of all the areas of computer training then being pioneered, the use of computers by older people, especially the age group over 60, seemed the most problematic. Older people hadn't grown up with computers, for the most part they didn't need to use them to work, and in some cases they had difficulties with hearing or vision that might make computer classes more difficult. And, after all, weren't they past the age where they could learn something new easily?

A few highly successful workshops later I could see how wrong these assumptions were. Seniors had the interest and the ability to learn to use computer tools — but they also had persistence, patience, and perhaps most important of all, time. I wrote a book called *Computers for Kids Over 60* (to order, see *Resources*, p. 23) and began to explore the various ways computers could be used to enhance the

lives of older adults. Crafting an on-line community for seniors seemed to be the right approach.

Thanks to a grant by the John and Mary Markle Foundation, the first SeniorNet program became a reality at the University of San Francisco in 1986. The project had two parts: the establishment of SeniorNet sites around the United States and the creation of an on-line communication network to connect site members with other computer-using seniors. My role has been to direct the project and create a national community of computer-using seniors — now international with the addition of Calgary in Canada.

More than two years later, 2,000 adults have taken the classes we offer, tailored especially for them, at 17 SeniorNet Centers across North America. The SeniorNet curriculum includes such courses as *Introduction to Telecommunications, Word Processing and Desktop Publishing, Electronic Citizenship* and *Financial Management with Spreadsheets*.

But despite the advantages of hands-on, senior-oriented computer instructions, the real heart of the SeniorNet program begins after class. A membership costs $10, and any SeniorNet member with a computer, a modem and telecommunications software can access the SeniorNet network for an average of $6.75 per hour during evenings and weekends. The available menu includes a bulletin board, catalogs, news, library services, a forum section and instructions for using the network, among other services.

Members can "talk" back and forth on-line or through the bulletin board and forum sections. A monthly live conference invites members to participate in a question and answer session. During the past two years SeniorNet members have debated various issues in the forum. The catastrophic health care bill provided much controversy. Often the network serves as an interactive diary, allowing people to record their thoughts and feelings when they are in the mood.

As Joan Elswit, a SeniorNet member from Oakton, Virginia, put it in a forum message: *"How it pleases me to have someone who knows what I am talking about when I say 'dustbowl.' SeniorNet has given me a place to talk with people my own age."*

Seniors can also communicate with their grandchildren on-line, substituting instantaneous connection for infrequent letters.

Results from the first two years showed that SeniorNet members began to play more active roles in their communities. Learning computer skills opened up job possibilities for some and helped others relate with computer-using family members. "Now I understand when my daughter says her boss isn't user-friendly."

> ***"The greatest thing since the invention of the wheel."***
>
> **SeniorNet student speaking about his computer**

We don't create the network. Our members do that. By by giving them access to technological tools we have the opportunity to share their ideas, learn from their experiences and understand their wisdom.

Mary S. Furlong is the executive director of SeniorNet and an associate professor of education at the University of San Francisco.

Re: Action

Starting a Site

SeniorNet sites are often situated in senior citizen centers, hospitals, libraries and other locations with the necessary space and convenience. To become a site, an organization needs:

- a secure facility for equipment;
- a site coordinator with good organizational skills;
- a site sponsor.

Sponsors often include businesses, foundations and individuals willing to provide financial support. For more information about SeniorNet membership or starting a site, contact:

Dr. Mary Furlong, executive director
SeniorNet
University of San Francisco
School of Education
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080
(415)666-6505

GOING FOR THE GOLD:

Prime time's sexy seniors have turned around their age group's TV image. But some viewers find them more brassy than sassy.

By Mary Cassata and Barbara Irwin

"I like this program because it gives me hope that there's life after 50!"
— 40-year-old woman

"The Golden Girls is supposed to be about women who can get along without men—and all they do is talk about them."
— 40-year-old man

Only a few years ago, anyone pitching a prime time program around the unlikely concept of three aging females sharing a household in Miami would have been considered ripe for the great TV asylum in the sky.

Despite the accelerating graying of America, the youth culture reigned. Aside from a few bright spots — Angela Lansbury of *Murder, She Wrote* among them — television's few 50-plus characters were negative and stereotyped.

Then NBC President Brandon Tartikoff invited writer Susan Harris to create a comedy series with serious overtones about what it means to grow older in America. With this recognition of television's new stage of maturity came a new strain of controversy: Does a comedy series centering around the issues of aging enhance or demean the identity of older people, especially older women?

Right from its September, 1985 debut the show's popularity has never been in question, and it's been a big Emmy win-

ner as well. Among other awards, all of its leading actresses have won Emmys for their portrayals.

The Golden Girls' high ratings indicate that its hoped-for popularity with viewers of all ages has been more than realized. Its ratings and rankings at 21.8 and fourth place showing in 1987-88 were higher than the 21.8 and seventh place ranking it garnered during its strong first season. As expected, the show has consistently rated higher among the older set, especially women. But it also held the attention of younger women, and, somewhat unexpectedly, the teen-age audience, who as a matter of record gravitate toward situation comedy.

Playing in Buffalo

Even with this financial success and critical acclaim, divergent viewer opinions about the show focused on the personalities and occupations of its strong-willed and lively female characters. After listening to the reactions of friends, students and acquaintances, I concluded that you either love *The Golden Girls* or you hate it, although a few comments demonstrated a love-hate relationship. As a communications professor with a long-time interest in the portrayal of the elderly, I wondered about this seemingly schizoid response. The small convenience sample used as the basis for this article was an attempt to read the pulse of the show's audience. In all, my research team interviewed 34 people in the greater Buffalo, New York, area at such sites as a large municipal hospital, state university, shopping mall, the hairdresser's and a senior citizen's center. The sample was composed of 19 women and 15 men ranging in age from 16 to 88 years. They were asked: *Do you watch* The Golden Girls? *Would you tell us what you like about the program — or dislike?* Overall, 65 percent of the sample liked the program, while 35 percent disliked it. More women (59 percent) than men (41 percent) held favorable opinions, while those who disliked the show divided evenly between the genders.

"Television has made young people old and old people young."

Mary Cassata

Buffalo seemed to be fertile ground for such a sample, since the show's local Arbitron ratings were even more dramatically positive than the nationwide Nielsens. According to Arbitron, the program climbed from a 21 rating and a 35 percent share (of the audience tuned in during its time slot) in the Buffalo market in November, 1985 to a 28 rating and 49 percent share in November 1986 and an even higher 29 rating and 50 share in November 1987. Once again, in Buffalo, older women and men were the show's heaviest viewers, followed by younger women and teens.

If Buffalo viewers liked the show so much, what did they like about it? Generally, for our pool of interviewees the hopeful message of "there's life after 50" seemed to be the key. As one 53-year-old married woman put it, "Exaggerated or not, I think the basic premise holds up: There are a lot of golden girls out there, full of life and mischief, not ready to roll over and play dead. They have sexual desires, too, destroying the myth that they're nonentities just because they're growing older!"

Viewers also appreciated the friendships and full lives of the characters. As one 42-year-old woman put it, the program "tells us that women without men in their lives need not be lonely." As a female hairstylist, 26, offered: "I like it because it's so realistic. I know people just like them. Two of my friends — divorcées — live together because they figure, 'Why struggle and be lonely when you can team up with someone who's in the same boat?'"

New Beginnings

The older adults in our sample appreciated the fact that aging does not mean throwing in the towel. It seems obvious that *The Golden Girls* has stamped an indelible message on the national consciousness of what it *can* mean to be aging and female in America. All the girl talk about sexual desires must surely have awakened the entire country to the notion that sexuality is not the exclusive province of the young.

What Viewers Love/Hate About *Golden Girls*

- Tight, original writing and witty dialogue. Situations are novel and amusing.
- Sharply defined characters include three single, mature women and the 80-plus mother of one of them. All are feisty, gutsy and outspoken.
- The message is loud and clear: Over-50 women *can* live without men and not be lonely! Viewers appreciate the clear message that aging doesn't mean throwing in the towel.
- Despite its humor, the writing is often clichéd and situations far-fetched; the writers are straining for the one-liner laugh.
- The characters are overdrawn and predictable — three immature, single women and their 80-year-old mascot who shocks with scatological language.
- These single women are supposed to be happy living without men, yet all they do is talk about them!

In theory, viewers become involved with television characters only if they can imagine them as real people. Soap operas are well known for their ability to involve their audiences through carefully drawn characterizations that enlist their sympathies. *The Golden Girls*, like many successful weekly series, functions the same way. Its characters grow and develop, revealing strengths and vulnerabilities that establish a direct relationship between the fictional character and the real person on the other side of the screen.

Of those we talked to, many of the show's critics also focused on these characterizations. Many, for example, assessed Blanche, Rose and Dorothy as sensitive, mature women who not only show love and respect for each other but share a responsibility for each other. Others, however, see them as insensitive — immature — not golden but brassy, with Sophia's advanced age an excuse for the writers to exercise bawdiness to test how much they can get away with.

"I like it sometimes and sometimes I don't," reflected a super senior in her late eighties interviewed between games of bingo at a senior citizens center. "It's funny, but then a lot of times it's silly. I like Sophia. She doesn't say a lot, but when she does, it's right on the mark!"

It's often said that if a story's characters are strong and carefully drawn they will write a story that can be never-ending. Many of our respondents considered the show's characters more memorable than the storylines. Sometimes the women acted out of "love" and "concern", but often they were just plain "silly" or "foolish." "Fantasy," "unreal," and "stretching it," were terms often used to describe content.

"Older women on television are nearly invisible. An older man might be seen on TV every 22 minutes, but an older woman would be seen every four to five hours."

media specialist Richard Davis, writing in 1984

Despite numerous plot stretches, faithful viewers have also been treated to a variety of issues of aging ordinarily ignored by television, ranging from hot flashes to preoccupations with dying mothers and deceased husbands, as well as the trials of widowhood and divorce. Viewers have shared in the bittersweet reflections on mortality that follow the death of a parent. They've also experienced the poignant contrast between the aging of the body and the ever-youthful spirit that follows each of us through life.

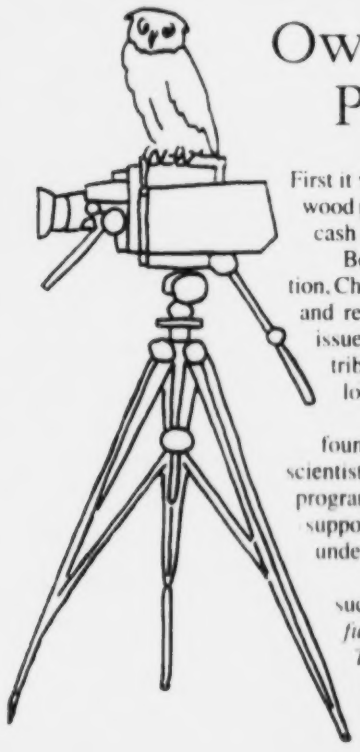
Audiences of all ages, but particularly the old, have empathized with the characters' feelings of despair and fear after having their home ransacked by thieves, the conflict between loss of privacy and the camaraderie of having a roommate and the joy of dressing the way you want despite what others may think.

Growing Up

For years, the older age group has been symbolically annihilated by television though sheer underrepresentation of their numbers and negative, stereotypical portrayals. *The Golden Girls* has done much to present a graying America in a positive light. Despite its humor, the show's strength lies in its ability to present the concerns of older people in a format viewers of all ages can identify with. Its characters shine most when their problems and feelings are real and believable. As role models, they need to be developed more seriously. They need to be shown as capable of development and learning, perhaps through the kind of educational programs, activist or social service volunteering or work with children that many older people become involved with.

The Golden Girls is one answer to the many older people who have asked: "Where am I on television?" It has also made it possible for younger people to see themselves in its post-50 characters. As always, its premise works best when it rests firmly in real feelings and situations instead of sight gags and one-liners. Whether it can find and retain this grounding in realism while showcasing the older adult will be the true test of whether it marks the beginning of a new "Golden Age" for television. Only then can we say that television has truly grown up as well.

Mary Cassata is an associate professor for mass communication at the State University of New York/Buffalo. Barbara Irwin is a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant in mass communication at SUNY/Buffalo.



Owl Awards Reward Positive Portrayals

First it was Oscar. Then Tony and Emmy. Now Hollywood producers are vying each year for over $30,000 in cash prizes and a "Wise Old Owl" statuette.

Begun in 1985 by the Retirement Research Foundation, Chicago, the National Media "Owl" Awards identify and reward accurate, creative media coverage of the issues surrounding aging. Well-known nationally distributed films or TV series are recognized as well as local productions and specialized training films.

Foundation president Joe Parkin notes that his foundation and others have traditionally supported scientists with research, development and evaluation of programs for the elderly. "With the Owl Awards, we support the artists who can give the public a thoughtful understanding of what aging means to all of us."

Over the years Owl Awards have been given to such outstanding productions as *The Trip to Bountiful* and *On Golden Pond*. Winners in 1988 included *The Whales of August*, *Foxfire*, *Acting Our Age* and *Young at Heart*. To contact the Owl Awards: Rosner & Liss Public Relations, 650 N. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60610, (312)664-6100.

HOW DOES HOLLYWOOD HANDLE AGEISM?

A conversation with two industry leaders

Editor's Note: *Is there ageism in Hollywood? According to a recent report by the Writers Guild of America on employment trends in the mid-1980s, the preference for youthful writers, directors and producers may be increasing even as movies and television feature more older people as primary characters. In the following selections from a recent interview,* Media&Values *talks with Dorothea and Daniel Petrie, a husband and wife who are both well-known for their production savvy and topflight direction/production credits. Dorothea Petrie produced, among other projects,* Foxfire, Love Is Never Silent *and* Picking Up the Pieces. *Daniel Petrie's most recent directorial credits are* Cocoon II: The Return, Rocket Gibraltar *and* Square Dance. *In this discussion they ponder the issue of ageism and the influence of maturity on the movies and television we see.*

...

Dorothea: You do sometimes hear, "We'd prefer someone younger for this project," but usually it's more subtle than that. In my opinion, it often seems that younger writers, directors and producers are more comfortable working with people their own age. Sometimes younger people doubt that their seniors are up on what's happening. Often, however, they're uncomfortable about exercising authority over someone older. It's easier to work with your same age peers.

Daniel: When I started out years ago, I remember that too many people were telling me, "Listen, kid, I've been in the business for 25 years, and therefore I know." Just because we've been working longer doesn't mean we're necessarily wiser or more intuitive.

Dorothea: But it does mean that we've faced a number of situations that younger people may not have had the opportunity to work through. On the other hand, I'm aware that I'm not always perceived as current as perhaps a younger producer would be. But different ages, working together, can strike a remarkable balance.

Cocoon II: The Return

I'd like to feel that's why younger executives, directors and crews enjoy working with me. I add a value to a project that can't be bought.

Daniel: Yes, the experience of all stages of life are valuable, not just of youth. The projects I've worked on are about people, not about people of a certain age. But I do feel that the trend is away from ageism and toward a recognition that older people have a unique voice.

Dorothea: That's not to deny that identifying a creative person as older can be restricting. I never answer the question: "How old are you?"— not because I want to deny my years, but because I do not believe numbers reflect age. But numbers do reflect a perception, and that perception may be limiting. I don't believe in limitations at any age.

Daniel: I had that feeling about directing *Cocoon II: The Return.* At first I wasn't too interested because it was a sequel. Then I read the script and was excited by the relationships and its mystic quality. The first film posited the idea that it was desirable to escape age and death. The second film questions that and deals much more directly with the value of living in the real world with its trials and tribulations. I would say it's about that and not about aging or death.

Dorothea: Those ideas about human values are also what I look for in a property. Anything that deals with the human condition is of interest. We all grow old, but it's the issues of maturity and not the physical process of aging that relates to our development as human beings.

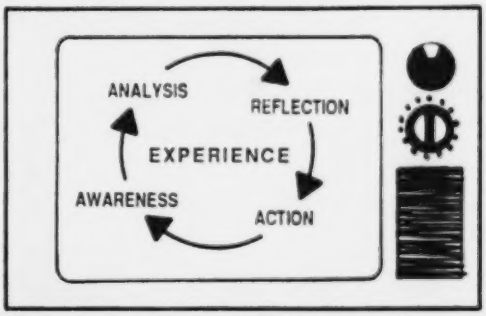
Daniel: There has been a change in attitude, though. For example, when the first *Cocoon* came out Twentieth Century Fox issed an edict: "No pictures of old people." Advance publicity focused on the grandson and the other younger characters. They were flabbergasted when they discovered how interested everybody was in 'those old people.' And now many upcoming projects feature older people; it's become a trend.

Dorothea: Of course, I hope that trend will continue. The attitude regarding age isn't new. I remember 25 years ago hearing, "Good heavens, if you want to lose your audience, do a story about old people." But with *Cocoon* and *Foxfire* we've seen what an audience a story about older people can generate.

REFLECTION / ACTION

Tools to build media awareness for groups, classes, families

How to Build Media Awareness



Media&Values is more than a magazine. It's a tool, a catalyst, for leading you — or helping you to lead others — from awareness to action on the many issues raised by today's mass media and new technology.

Whether you're a teacher, counselor, youth worker, religious leader, or just an active media watcher of any age, the ideas and activities on the following pages can help you examine your media environment and "make the connections" between what we hear, read and watch and our everyday lives.

Many people ask if anything can really be done about issues like sexual violence in the media, bias in the news or advertising to children. Yes, of course! But because the mass media system is only one aspect of our very complex social structure — with economic, political and cultural ramifications — change comes slowly.

Thus there are no easy answers, or quick-fix solutions. Perhaps, indeed, what is most important is learning to question, to be suspicious, to challenge what we see and hear and to test it against our experience.

That's where *Media&Values* can help.

Using a framework created by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, each issue of *Media&Values* takes the reader — individually or as part of a group — through a four-step process of media awareness/analysis/reflection/action. Note how the magazine is put together:

- Initial articles raise our awareness of the theme topic, providing the political, economic, social, cultural and historical background to help you analyze the theme.
- Next, our regular standing columnists provide thoughtful reflection and ideas for involvement by different groups and audiences in society.
- An extensive bibliography and resource listing provide direction for deeper exploration and program planning for classes, workshops and study groups.
- Action suggestions, including a special reproducible activity page, and *Re:Action* boxes are scattered throughout the issue.
- Finally, on the last page, the editor focuses on follow-up value connections and offers next steps for involvement at the local level.

Whether a group is two people over breakfast, a dozen children in kindergarten, a college seminar class, or eight individuals in a church study group, we all have media experiences to share! Stimulated by the articles and ideas in *Media&Values* we can reflect on these experiences and gain deeper insight into how we use the media, how the media uses us and what steps we can take, individually or as a society, to keep our media values in a healthy perspective.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

TV Still Sidesteps Real Life Struggles

By Donna Demac

Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury) is a TV character I can admire. A successful mystery writer who can be seen each week in *Murder, She Wrote*, Ms. Fletcher has warmth, wit and modesty. She sets her own schedule, and has a long list of loving friends and relatives whom she visits just when needed to solve a murder and leaves as soon as the case is solved.

Also she is unflappable and very smart. When young male police officers dismiss her as an old meddler — which they often do — she simply humors them and later gets even by solving the crime.

Television has extraordinary power to shape peoples' expectations. Because *Murder, She Wrote* surpasses the usual stereotypes of older women, it's worth considering its principal character's attitude toward family, work and society.

In brief, Jessica has none of the typical family problems — no household to run, no demanding kids or spouse, no unpaid bills. Nor does she have a boss, a pension to worry about, or even hassles with her publisher. She's clearly in that five percent of American authors who write their own ticket.

But perhaps most interesting is Ms. Fletcher's attitude toward society, as seen in her encounters with the police. Like Sherlock, she has little use for the ordinary detective and, by extension, tries to avoid contact with institutions.

What message can be found here? The typical television image of an older woman is a *Hausfrau* clown. *Murder, She Wrote* offers a third model, in which aging grace-

"Between 1969 and 1980 only one percent of network shows featured characters 65 and older. Their omission apparently reflects the sentiment of a market-based, productivity-obsessed culture. Since the elderly are seen as past their prime as productive employees and consumers, they are no longer important enough to dramatic social life to merit major dramatic roles or be used as positive role models in advertisements."

Lawrence A. Powell and John B. Williamson

fully requires that a woman be a major success, live alone, work for no one and have little contact with the wider society.

For many viewers, perhaps, Jessica's independence and self-reliance represent a refreshing change from lives overburdened with financial concern, health problems and dependence on others. But in real life, the flip side of freedom may well be loneliness.

While I will continue admiring both Jessica Fletcher and the programmers and writers who created her, I'm still waiting for a recognition that a productive old age can coexist with a Social Security check, a pension allotment and an annual checkup. And when writers learn to create characters who can show their strength by dealing with normal human relationships, the problems of daily living and maybe even their own personal struggle to improve society, then I'll really sit up and cheer.

Attorney Donna Demac teaches communications and law at New York University.

CHILDREN

Media Help Fill Grandparent Gap

By Judith Myers-Walls

Today's children are more likely to have living grandparents and perhaps great-grandparents than youngsters a century ago. But distance, estrangement, death, even work (yes, the elderly work, too) separate many children from their grandparents. Media can provide a link.

Current programming portraying aging adults is beginning to show them as three-dimensional individuals with ideas, interests, emotions and energy. Shows like *Our House*, *The Golden Girls*, and even *Captain Kangaroo* provide a variety of models for children to consider. Children whose contact with older relatives is limited, especially, can benefit from learning to know TV's grandparents and enjoying their relationships with their television families.

After watching a program that presents images of aging, discuss those images with children. Explore the relationship of aging to illness, death and activity levels, and use the media to verify that older people lead active lives.

Questions for discussion might focus on the healthy variety shown on the screen. What do TV's grandparents have in common? How are they different? Would the child like to have them for grandparents? How are they like or different from his or her own older relatives? What have they learned in their years of living that their TV grandchildren don't know?

Families with no close older relatives can use acquaintance with TV "grandparents" as a springboard for getting to know actual old people: visiting nursing homes, making videotapes, writing letters or talking by computer with faraway grandparents. Contact need not be all in one direction; many grandparents would be happy to send audio or videotapes as a special message to grandchildren.

Family or class "adopt a grandparent" programs can use TV characters to center discussions of the real people they meet.

Of course, the media alone cannot take the place of direct contact between children and the elderly. Children cannot experience the thrill of holding a wrinkled hand, the joy of an older person's smile greeting them or the mutual sharing of stories without developing a direct relationship. But in this age-segregated society it is all too easy for children to grow up in isolation from older individuals, depriving them of special friendships and the chance to understand the aging process. With proper guidance the media can help families take the first step toward bridging the gap.

Judith A. Myers-Walls is associate professor of child development at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana.

PASTORING

Senior Productions Raise Self-Esteem

By Rev. Peter Paulsen

Older viewers face a confusing TV world. Despite recent improvements, over-50 characters are all too often stereotyped or ignored. Crime and violence featured on news and action shows contribute to older people's unease about their personal safety. At the same time, commercials and features imply that the magic of technology can eliminate the physical toll of aging itself.

Stereotyping and media misunderstanding must be found on many levels. Making older viewers the stars of their own shows is one of the most effective, since it raises self-esteem while providing hands-on media instruction. Existing video resources owned by religious and nonprofit groups in many communities can be adapted to senior uses with only a little adjustment. Seniors trained to use video cameras and microphones can soon be creating their own programs and documentaries while learning the language of television.

The most successful efforts respond to local needs. In one notable example, a cable channel serving a large retirement

"By culturally legitimizing their devalued status, media portrayals instruct the elderly in the assumption of subordinate roles in society."

Social Policy

community is operated by resident volunteers. Aided at times by a paid manager and small technical staff, its older production personnel have created community news programs, commentaries and talk shows, documentaries on local attractions, even a cooking show.

This program's success demonstrates that seniors, like the rest of us, are attracted to solid enterprises that promise real rewards in learning and achievement. A well-conceived production effort led by respected local experts is the best place to start.

Planning a Program

1. Assess interest and recruit leaders before beginning. If possible, instructors should be interested in and experienced with a senior audience. They should have enough time available to assist with production problems as they occur.

2. Plan for needed equipment upgrade, backup staff support and continuing training from the start of production. Departures of key people, rising expectations and inadequate support can lead to frustration.

3. Productions that attempt to duplicate the local TV station miss the point. Encourage program planners to address their own needs as a unique group.

Media production can be an enthralling experience for a properly supported older group. But perhaps its greatest payoff lies in the message its practitioners create — what's important to them, what their lives are like, what their stories have taught them about the history they've lived through and their place in it. That's what I'm watching for as seniors take their rightful place in the production world of television.

A former media consultant, Peter Paulsen is a pastor and program executive in the Reformed Church in America.

WOMEN

Stereotype Shifts to Sexy Schemers

By Sally Steenland

The TV pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other. A decade ago older women were virtually invisible on television, and those who could be found were portrayed, with few exceptions, as pathetic victims or silly eccentrics. Older women's characters tended to be powerless, befuddled, inflexible, and feeble. They also were sexless, since scriptwriters paired older male characters with younger females.

However, such uniformly negative stereotypes of older women are hard to find on today's TV programs. They have been replaced instead by exceedingly positive stereotypes: female characters over 50 who look like they're 30; powerful midlife women in top executive jobs. Instead of white-haired grannies, we now see women in their 50s and 60s endlessly pursued by desirable men. These older women have no money worries at all. In fact, over one-quarter of all older women on TV in 1986 were millionaires!

In *Who's the Boss*, Mona is a grandmother who dates college boys; on *Dynasty* Alexis is an oil tycoon pursued by a handsome younger man; on *Falcon Crest*, Angela is a scheming executive; and on *Dallas*, Miss Ellie is a widowed heir to an oil fortune who falls in love and remarries. To be sure, there are older women on TV who are more down-to-earth, such as *The Golden Girls*, attractive Jessica Fletcher on *Murder, She Wrote*, the judge on *My Two Dads* and Miss Marie, the retired waitress on the recently-canceled *Frank's Place*.

But for the most part today's midlife female characters face no age or sex discrimination as they grow older. The barriers they face are personal, not societal. In fact, age is irrelevant, for it neither hinders nor limits in TV's created world. Midlife females enjoy as many opportunities as young women half their age.

Although sometimes seen as positive role models, these images are unrealistic fantasies for most older women viewers. Still missing from the screen are older female characters whose lives and faces show the evidence of their experiences, whose portrayals are both positive and realistic. Their absence supports the clear if unspoken assumption that women whose power and personal attractiveness don't match the soap opera standard are somehow lacking.

As the viewing population continues to age, rising numbers will continue to increase the clout of older women viewers. And they need to make their voices heard.

While watching, consider:

- Do older female characters experience problems or difficulties related to their age? Any benefits?
- What kind of lifestyles do characters lead? Are they married? Do they have jobs? Are they well off economically?
- How true to life are their lives and problems? Do they share the same concerns as women you know?
- Do their personal characteristics — decisiveness, creativity, wisdom, independence, courage, inflexibility, eccentricity, powerlessness, confusion, feebleness — link them to old and new stereotypes? If so, do they manage, as characters, to rise above them and become real?

Everyone needs fantasies. But TV's appetite for glamour has long overwhelmed its understanding of real women's lives. To add older women to the sisterhood of the sleek and sexy only obscures the truly inspiring stories that could be reflected on the screen. As we watch we must remember not just what we're seeing, but what could be seen.

Sally Steenland is the media director of the National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women.

"Society is growing out of its adolescence. Pretty soon the younger generation may not trust anybody under 30."

Ray Browne, Bowling Green State University

YOUTH

Big Chill Cools Lost Generation

By Bill Wolfe

In my many, many years as a youth leader I've seen a lot of changes. But among the most drastic is the current cultural shift from an emphasis on youth to one on maturity. Fifteen or 20 years ago, the baby boomers fascinated us all. Now they're turning 40 and they still do.

Along with the aging of the population, media has done an about face. Instead of programming for teens in the hopes of creating new consumers, media planners are still harvesting dollars from the heart of the baby boom generation. In the process, media has discovered impressive numbers of older persons. Indeed the median age in the U.S. today is 32, and it is fast escalating.

To test the trend, all you have to do is twist the radio dial. Radio stations across the country are moving to "easy listening" and '50s and '60s revival programming that light up the memories of boomers and their elders. Programs for today's teens are actually in short supply.

TV and movie producers are moving in the same direction — note the number of scripts about midlife identity crises. Even shows that feature youthful characters are increasingly turning their main content to adult concerns. Take this season's *Bill Cosby Show*. Now that son Theo is out of high school, watch to see what the family conflicts and crises center on.

The broadening of many shows to include older characters often eliminates stereotypes. But in some cases it can mean that the voice of youth is left out.

Many of the teens I talk to feel that this demographic oddity has left their generation orphaned. Brought up on the memories of the youth culture of others, they feel the absence of a culture of their own. Only two kinds of youth make headlines, they say: those who are the superlatives (as athlete, scholar, computer whiz) and those who get caught for a crime or traffic accident. But who cares what happens to the average young person who happened to be born when, demographically, fewer children came into the world?

Youth leaders can help the young people they work with feel wanted by encouraging their leadership skills and ability to make a difference in the world. Adults in general can help by remembering that being young today is not the same as it was during the decades when the youth culture reigned supreme.

Bill Wolfe is director of senior high educational ministries, Board of Discipleship, United Methodist Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

FAMILY LIFE

Media Helps Harvest History and Heritage

By Helen H. Graham

Have you ever wished you had asked a grandparent or favorite aunt some questions about their unique experiences?

Media now provide families with a variety of opportunities to capture the moment. In addition to written journals and photographs, audiocassette recorders and video cameras can preserve family stories and the treasured personas of loved ones. The immediacy of a grandparent or other relative's voice and/or image is special indeed.

All family members can be involved in preparing an oral history. Gather two or more family members (the more the better) around a cassette recorder or video camera. Questions that stimulate stories and detailed recollections will spark the most memories:

- What was life like when you were a child? What do you remember best from the year you were seven? Ten? Sixteen?
- How did you celebrate family holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays, Hanukkah or Easter?
- What did you and your family do to entertain yourselves before television was invented?
- Who was your hero or heroine?
- How did you meet your spouse?
- What are your most treasured memories of your parents, sisters and brothers or other family members?
- Ask the participant to sing, play or tell stories, songs or musical pieces he or she grew up with. If you're using a video, interviewees may demonstrate a dance, craft technique or special skill. Recounting or demonstrating a favorite family recipe on audio or videotape is often the best way to record it.

Setting aside plenty of time for the recording process will help reassure a nervous older relative. If you relax and let the session unfold at its own pace, the chances are good that everyone involved will forget the equipment. The spontaneity and enjoyment of a family remembering session can become a precious gift for everyone involved.

Memories and shared family heritages are irreplaceable. The process is fun, and it gives a sense of continuity to everyone from age two to 92.

Helen Hallum Graham is a communications consultant and multi-media producer in Atlanta, Georgia. She is married and the mother of seven.

If you're interested in compiling an oral history of your own, the following books may help you:

How to Write Your Autobiography: Preserving Your Family Heritage by Patricia Ann Case. Woodbridge Press Publishing Company (1977), P.O. Box 6189, Santa Barbara, CA 93111, (805)965-7039, $5.95.

How to Write Your Own Life Story: A Step by Step Guide for the Non-Professional Writer by Lois Daniel. Chicago Review Press (1980), 814 N. Franklin, Chicago, IL 60610, (312)337-0747, $8.95.

Nursing Home Tool: *Video visits help families say 'I love you'*

By Barbie White

Like many nursing home patients, 90-year-old Trudy Smith resented being placed in The Center for the Aging in Washington, D. C. She complained that her sister had abandoned her and she felt unloved and unwanted.

At least she did until her sister and other family members joined the center's Visiting Through Video (V-TV) program. Working through the experimental program they created a short video tape about Trudy's past life and their feelings for her.

Featured in the video were remembrances of family activities and trips and Trudy's favorite hobby: bread-making. Watching the tape over and over she re-experienced family closeness and a sense of herself as a vital, active person. In a few short weeks her attitude improved and she began to accept the limitations caused by Alzheimer's disease.

Participation in the program often helps to improve family communication, according to Karen Warburton, a center research associate and a key staff worker in the V-TV program. "Visiting is often difficult for family members. Many times, videos strengthen the family-resident relationship and lift everyone's morale."

Although family members are given general guidelines and help with equipment, what they choose to say is up to them. Some families use their videos to strengthen the recollections of forgetful patients, perhaps by repeating facts about their past lives. Others are more personal, describing family events and sending affectionate messages for their loved ones.

"Sometimes families find it easier to say 'I love you' on video than in person," Warburton states.

Once a video is completed at the center, staff members follow a regular program for helping residents play it at least six times during the next two or three weeks. After that, they may wish to play it only occasionally. The videos have been particularly useful in helping staff cheer up residents who may be experiencing depression or having a difficult day.

The program was developed by center executive Elaine Frank and funded by a grant from the Markle Foundation. A concurrent research study is examining long-term effects on residents' attitudes.

The staff benefits as well, says Frank. By learning more about each resident's history and personality, they are able to provide individualized attention and deal more directly with specific problems and concerns.

Could the program serve as a model for others?

Absolutely, say Warburton and Frank. It's a project that could be developed not only by a nursing home itself, but also by outside community groups — churches/synagogues, volunteer agencies or even as a college or high school video production project.

As Frank notes, initial cost of the video recording equipment is fairly economical and could be supported by a donor or other special project money. Almost every nursing home has a video tape player and the program requires little additional staff support or administrative time. "It's one of those rare programs where everybody benefits."

Besides, it's never too late to say "I love you."

Barbie White is a Media&Values *editorial research intern. She is a senior in journalism at California State University, Northridge.*

Re: Action

Color Me Welcome

Billed as "An Intergenerational Classroom and Family Life Enrichment Coloring/Activity Book," *Welcome To Our Nursing Home* uses child-oriented activities to explain the environment and function of nursing homes to young children. Warm, multi-racial drawings of old people and their attendants and a simple but informative text highlight a book the whole family can enjoy. Also an excellent resource for classes and groups. Especially recommended as an introduction for children's first visits to nursing homes. Order from: Beverly Foundation, 99 S. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91101. (818)792-2202. $1/book plus shipping and handling. Quantity discounts and study guide available.

How to Watch Television with your Grandchildren

By Ellen DeFranco

To older people, the world we thought we knew seems to be continually disappearing and electronic media are a large part of the new vistas that continually emerge. In contrast to the relative simplicity of our own childhoods, many of us view the media playthings surrounding our grandchildren with awe. VCR cassettes are a long way from crystal radio sets with earphones!

Like many others my age, I have mixed feelings about the proliferation of media in my grandchildren's lives. On the one hand, I burst with pride and even envy when I see how easily they master the equipment. At the same time I join many other grandparents (and parents as well) in questioning the impact of so much media on their growth and development.

To me, much of what children hear and see on television and experience with media seems so frenetic and loud! But deeper than that, I worry about the commercialism of so much of today's popular culture, the easy violence of too many TV plots and, yes, the suggestive words and actions that children quickly imitate long before they can possibly experience the depth of human sexuality.

A grandparent who openly criticizes a grandchild's media use is treading a precarious path, however. In addition, to question media choices in their homes is to judge our children's parenting skills. Thus the media gap could become a generation gap and there is a danger that any views we voice may be seen as meddling or a conflict in lifestyles.

Nevertheless for far too long too many adults have been lulled into complacency by the myth that media is the only "mindless entertainment." We (including many of our adult children) can see clearly now in the newest generations that media is far more influential than we ever imagined.

While it is difficult to 'prove' specific long-term effects of media's influence, research does indicate that when adults counteract media messages with their own values and opinions, the child learns from the adult, *not* the media. It is best, of course, for parents to monitor their children's media. But when children are in our care, we must accept that responsibility as well.

The first step is to increase our awareness about media and the role it plays in our own lives. Fill out the questionnaire on the next page and use it to think about how you might become more interactive with your grandchildren. If you wish, copy the questionnaire on any copy machine before you fill it out. Share it with family members or friends in your club, church, synagogue or senior center. It could start a lively discussion!

Children do need guidance in their use of media. As today's youngsters mature they must learn to select from the wide range of information available to them. The experience of their elders can help them make wise choices in an ever-expanding media world.

Try These Tips

- Fully express your admiration for your grandchildren's media knowledge and expertise.
- Show interest in each child's favorite shows and watch them with him or her.
- Ask well-directed questions to learn what needs and preferences are satisfied by each program. For example: "Do you believe something like that could happen in real life?" "Tell me in your own words what happened" "Can you make up another ending?" Encourage the child to do most of the talking.
- If a program or an incident in a program seems inappropriate, state what you disagree with and *why*. Get feedback from the child and discuss this seriously without arguing. Be clear about your values if they differ from values or behavior on TV, in music, etc.
- Be observant for children having problems with media, *e.g.*, TV-influenced nightmares, violent play, unrealistic demands for advertised toys or food. Work with parents to control the child's media diet; support viewing guidelines when the children are with you.
- Suggest excursions based on TV themes or provide other supplemental material (books, videos, games) that can expand the TV viewing experience.

Ellen DeFranco, a retired teacher and the author of TV: On/Off: Better Family Use of Television, *coordinates educational outreach at* Media&Values.

Who's in Charge?

a questionnaire for grandparents about television and media

1. What kinds of electronic media do you use with your grandchildren?

- ❑ Television
- ❑ Radio
- ❑ VCR
- ❑ Stereo
- ❑ Cable
- ❑ Computer

2. How many of the above kinds of media equipment are in your home?

- ❑ All
- ❑ Some
- ❑ Most
- ❑ None

3. How many are in your grandchildren's home?

- ❑ All
- ❑ Some
- ❑ Most
- ❑ None

4. If you are together while watching television, how do you decide what to watch?

- ❑ They make the decision.
- ❑ We check *TV Guide* or newspaper listing.
- ❑ I've seen the show before and think it's good entertainment.
- ❑ A TV critic or friend I trust recommended it.
- ❑ Other:_____

5. Do you discuss the theme or content of a TV program with them?

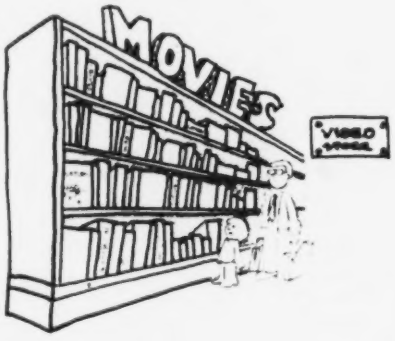
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

6. When do you discuss the show with them?

- ❑ Before
- ❑ During
- ❑ After
- ❑ All of the above.

7. What do you do when something comes on TV which you dislike or disagree with and your grandchildren are with you?

- ❑ Ignore it.
- ❑ Switch the channel.
- ❑ Turn off the TV
- ❑ Point out what I do not like and explain why.
- ❑ Divert the children to another room or activity.



8. If you have access to a VCR, do you pretape programs you would like them to see?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

9. How do you decide what programs to tape?

- ❑ It stars their favorite actor/actress.
- ❑ It's about a subject they are interested in.
- ❑ It has educational value (history, science, literature, etc.)
- ❑ It's a show we like to watch together and talk about.

10. Do you ever rent a VCR movie for them?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

11. How do you select the movie?

- ❑ Child's choice.
- ❑ I look for the rating and read what it's about.
- ❑ I ask my friends whose opinions I trust.
- ❑ I read about new releases and suggest movies we can watch together.
- ❑ It's a movie I want to see.

12. What other kinds of programs do you rent or buy?

- ❑ Videos about their favorite sport or hobby.
- ❑ Educational programs
- ❑ Documentaries or historical shows
- ❑ Music videos
- ❑ Religious stories or programs
- ❑ Other: _____

13. If you or your grandchildren have access to a computer, do you buy them computer programs?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

14. If yes, what kind of programs?

- ❑ Recreational games
- ❑ Educational games
- ❑ Programs to help with schoolwork.
- ❑ Other: _____

15. Do you discuss with their parents how the grandchildren use electronic media?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

16. If yes, do they value what you say? Do you value what they say?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

17. How many hours per day (avg.) is the television on in your home?

- ❑ none
- ❑ 1-3
- ❑ 4-7
- ❑ 8 or more

Here are some other questions you might want to talk about with friends or family:

18. What are your concerns about your grandchildren and today's media environment?

19. What criteria have you developed for using media in your life and/or guiding your grandchildren?

20. Would you like more tips and information about how to use media better? What kind of information would be useful to you?

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Media&Values is a project of the Center for Media and Values, a not-for-profit educational organization to promote thoughtful awareness and better use of television and mass media. Membership is $25/year and includes Media&Values magazine. Additional contributions are tax-deductible.

Media&Values, 1962 S. Shenandoah, Los Angeles, CA 90034 / 213-559-2944

WATCH, READ, LISTEN

Resources for Follow-up

IN PRINT

• ***Computers for Kids Over Sixty***. Greg Kearsley and Mary Furlong's computer sourcebook for seniors, provides specially tailored suggestions for writing, financial management, telecommunicating and other areas of interest. Park Row Press (November 1988), 4640 Jewell St., #101, San Diego, CA 92109, (619)581-6778, $12.95.

• The Gray Panther Media Watch Task Force compiled the ***Gray Panther Media Guide: Age and Youth in Action*** in response to issues raised at a 1981 conference on media portrayals of aging. It describes the development and history of media stereotypes and offers advice on how to organize action at the local level. Gray Panther Media Watch Task Force (1983), 311 S. Juniper St., Suite 601, Philadelphia, PA 19107, (215)545-6500, $4.

• ***"Growing Older: Perceptions and Representations"*** was published as a special series of articles in the Winter, 1980, issue of the *Journal of Communication*. Although the publication date reflects research from the 1970s, the issue offers perspectives on "How the Elderly Perceive Television Commercials," "Television Viewing and Self-Concept of the Elderly," and "Approaching Invisibility: The Portrayal of Elderly in Magazine Advertisements." Oxford University Press, 1600 Pollitt Drive, Fair Lawn, NJ 07410, (201)796-8000, ext. 5141: Sharon Doboe, $7.

• ***Life on Daytime Television: Tuning-in American Serial Drama***, by Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill, outlines a study conducted with Patricia A. Anderson on the "Images of Old Age on Daytime." Ablex Publishing Coorporation (1983), 355 Chestnut St., Norwood, NJ, 07648, (201)767-8450, $27.50.

• In his 1980 book, ***Television and the Aging Audience***, Richard Davis provided one of the first volumes to discuss television's importance as a medium to and for older persons. Lexington Books, Division of D.C. Heath & Co., 125 Spring St., Lexington, MA 02173, (617)862-6650, $12.

• ***Television Looks at Aging***, introduced by Dr. Mary Cassata, is a national sample of television programming in the 1980s. The book shows how television is helping to make older Americans more visible. Television Information Office (1985), 745 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10151, (212)759-6800, $6.95.

• ***"Trends in the Portrayal of the Elderly,"*** an article from ***Life on Television*** by Bradley S. Greenberg, details a study on how media stereotypes of older persons impact television audiences. Ablex Publishing Coporation (1984), 355 Chestnut St., Norwood, NJ, 07648, (201)767-8450, $24.95.

• In ***"The Mass Media and the Aged,"*** (in the Summer, 1985 issue of *Social Policy*), Lawrence Powell and John Williamson review over 20 years of research on media issues in the area of aging. Includes a comprehensive research bibliography as well. Check your library for *Social Policy*, or the issue is available from *Social Policy*, 33 W. 42nd St., Room 620 N, New York, NY 10036, (212)840-7619, $5.

• ***Attitudes and Technologies — Striving to Match New Electronic Information, Products and Services to the Needs and Interests of Elderly People***, by Michael Tingay, is seventh in a continuing series of ***Communications and Society Forum Reports*** from the Aspen Institute examining the use of technology to benefit the elderly. To order, call or write W. Daniel Wright, Publications Office, Aspen Institute, Box 150, Queenstown, MD 21658, (301)827-7168, Free.

• ***TV's Image of the Elderly: A Practical Guide for Change*** by Richard H. Davis and James A. Davis, investigates the quality and quantity of attention given to aging issues on television and strives to show people how to use the media to reach the public with information about older persons. Lexington Books (1985), Division of D. C. Heath & Co., 125 Spring St., Lexington, MA 02173, (617)862-6650, $37.

SIGHT/SOUND

• ***Aging in America: Media Attitudes Towards Aging*** is a 30-minute audio cassette from National Public Radio (1980), Cassette Publishing, 2025 M Street N.W., Washington, DC 20036, (800)253-0808, $11.50.

ORGANIZATIONS

• The nation's largest organization for mature adults, the ***American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)*** takes a very active role in monitoring, initiating change, and setting the standards for media portrayals of the aging audience. Publishes several newsletters and the magazine, *Modern Maturity*. In addition, their ***National Gerontological Resource Center*** contains the largest collection of materials concerning older persons in the nation. 1909 K Street N.W., Washington, DC 20049, (202)872-4700.

• ***SeniorNet***, established in 1986, teaches adults over 55 to use computers to communicate, socialize, and keep abreast of current events. Write to: USF School of Education, Ignatian Heights, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080 or call Dr. Mary Furlong at (415)666-6505.

• The ***American Society on Aging*** provides resources, including their quarterly publication, *Generations*, to enhance the well-being of older individuals and to foster unity among those who work with and for the elderly. 833 Market St. #512, San Francisco, CA 94103, (415)543-2617.

• The ***National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA)*** coordinates response by the major religious communities and faith groups to issues and problems of aging. Box 1924, Athens, GA 30603, (404)353-1331.

SPRINGBOARD TO ACTION

Putting this issue to work

By Elizabeth Thoman, Editor

Everybody talks about "the media." But is there anything you can really do about it? Of course! And you don't have to carry a picket sign to demonstrate your concern for values in your media environment.

Next Steps

1. The key to media awareness is questioning one's own media attitudes. I hope many groups will encourage the grandparents (and even parents!) among them to take the "Grandparents Survey" on page 22. Better yet, duplicate pp. 21-22 as a handout for discussion wherever seniors gather.

2. You'll want to be on the lookout for continued incidences of "granny bashing" in the media. Watch for the issue of elder-care vs. child care to heat up during the coming budget discussions. The issue is a complex one with many vested interests; be suspicious about what you read and hear.

3. Those who provide services or enrichment programs for older persons (in churches/synagogues, community centers, retirement or life care communities) should be more aware of the importance of media awareness education for viewers of all ages. A common TV room should have a bulletin board where reviews of upcoming or popular programs can be posted. Seniors' own critiques should be elicited and shared — on the bulletin board, in a newsletter, perhaps in a regular discussion group about media issues and programs.

4. For me, one of the most exciting ideas in the issue is the brief feature on "video visiting" (page 20). This is a creative but low-cost program that could be developed not only by nursing home outreach staffs but by a church/synagogue as well. What about designating one Sunday a month to set up a small video studio in an unused room? Invite families to sign up for time to make a brief tape for a relative or friend in a nursing home. Youth groups or media students could volunteer to handle the technical details. Invite a media professional to run the program.

5. A practical tip for all ages: Elderly persons most often use mass media in order to share with others and create common ground with friends and family (page 6). So when visiting elderly relatives or striking up a conversation, start with a media question or experience: What show would they recommend you to watch — and why? If an historical drama or movie has been on recently, invite them to comment on their own memory of the event. How did the media version differ?

If We'd Only Had Room

We had a number of ideas for articles that we just didn't have space for. The concepts might make interesting activities for group discussion with young or old:

• What images do we get of grandparents or other older persons in comic strips and cartoons? *e.g.*, the grandmother in *Family Circle*, the grandpa in *Crankshaft*, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, neighbors of *Dennis, the Menace*? Collect some sample strips and compare.

• What values do grandparents or older persons stand for in television commercials? Countrytime Lemonade, Quaker Oatmeal, McDonalds and Pepsi have all featured vignettes involving older characters. What messages do they portray? What underlying values does their presence "say" about the product? Could someone of another age convey the same value?

Emerging Questions

Finally, even as we go to press, new questions come into focus:

• *Lear's* magazine (for "women who weren't born yesterday") is designed to boost the image of the older woman. Does it, instead, contain ads for "anti-aging supplements" that exploit "gerontophobia" (fear of aging) and create in women a felt need to appear younger than their chronological age?

• Some caregivers say more frail seniors would stay involved in the media world "if they could see it; if they could hear it; if they could focus clearly." Wonder what a difference it would make if TV rooms in nursing homes all had large-screen TVs with light-weight earphones for every viewer?

• The last few years have witnessed a dramatic and, for the most part, welcome recognition of elders as vigorous and active members of society. But has changing the image from destitute widow to hedonistic consumer become problematic? Is it hypocritical? Or just a logical outcome of our pluralistic society?

Next Issue

We'll look at *The Birds, the Bees and Broadcasting:* What the Media Teaches Our Kids About Sex.

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